

The Far Side of Thunderbolt

BY HELEN TOPPING MILLER.

A Wise Old Doctor—The Way of the Domineering Susongs With Their Woman Folk—A Son and Heir—A Moving Story of Action and Feeling.

DR. ENOS RUMLY climbed the three steep steps of his back porch wearily. He had been thirteen hours on his feet, bent over a two-low bed, and his thighs ached and quivered, his gaunt body sagged.

In the kitchen Ella Joe Martin, Rumly's sister-in-law, had left a candle burning on top of the ice box. That was code for the assurance that there was warm food in the oven. Sitting on the kitchen table, he ate rapidly, dropping crumbs to a weird-eyed, coal-black kitten that leaped off the ironing board and solicited alms. It was then that he noted the low murmur of voices from the front of the house.

"And I ain't going out again tonight," he vowed to himself as he bolted the last fragment of dumpling.

He gathered up his coat and hat and the old black bag, and, with amazing lightness for so huge a frame, made for the back stairs, avoiding the board that squeaked. He had almost gained the door of the upper hall when a portly ghost in a blue flannel wrapper came tiptoeing ponderously up the front way and confronted him.

"You got home?" greeted Ella Joe Martin cheerfully and with disconcerting lung power. "Fred Susong's down there wanting to see you."

Rumly opened the door of his room and bowed her in.

"I ain't wanting to see him," he grumbled. "What do you want to holler so everybody on this block can hear you for?"

"I ain't hollering. He's been waiting since 8 o'clock. He says the baby's choking worse every minute."

RUMLY sat down on the bed. "Fred Susong allows he knows about everything," he declared. "Looks like he'd know how to stop his baby choking."

Ella Joe frowned: "This ain't no time to hold grudges, Enos Rumly, when your child's maybe dying."

"I ain't holding grudges. I'm going to bed. They got doctors over to Parrottsville—good doctors. I've heard Fred Susong say how smart their doctors was. I'm wore out."

"Well, I'll just go down and tell Fred you're sick and can't come."

"Why didn't he go to Parrottsville in the first place?"

"You know well as I do why he didn't, Enos Rumly. The river's up over there and the ferry ain't runnin'.

"Well, it'll be up out here to Thunderbolt directly if he don't start along pretty quick."

"I reckon it's good thing you ain't going," assented Ella Joe with surprising meekness, "but it'll be sort of hard on Luella if anything should happen to that baby."

"Fred drive his own horse," demanded Rumly.

"He came in his car. I laid your flannel nightshirt out cross the foot of your bed. It's going to turn cold toward morning."

"You can't get anywhere in a car, roads like these. What that young one needs is antitoxin, likely, and there ain't a shot to be had nearer than Parrottsville. I used the last I had on that young one of Owenses that was so bad."

Ella Joe turned to leave. "I don't reckon you locked the back door? You always forget it. You better leave that bag out here so I can clean the things up first thing in the morning."

"Looks like I ain't never going to get a chance to leave it anywhere! I don't know what in confoundation Fred come over here in a car for."

"Well, he said it wasn't raining hard when he started. What did Clemmy have—another girl?"

"Good thing she has girls. They's enough pesky men infesting this earth now! Voting against bridge bonds and raising sand about taxes for roads. Maybe when all Clemmy's girls can vote we'll get some decent roads in this county. Is that old road of mine bailed out?"

"It's in the bag, wrapped up in gauze. I never laid a finger on it after it come out of the water."

"Fred won't pay me for seven years. And then he'll want me to take it out in molasses or something. You can run the shoes right off your horse waiting on them Susongs, and there ain't no use to sue 'em, for they've got everything tied up in their wives' names and got their wives so broadbeat they dassent put two spoonfuls of lard in the biscuits."

"Well, I didn't tell him for sure you'd laid a lot out to Weavers'. He said he'd wait anyway—he acts mighty worried—not peart and biggity like he usually is."

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MOST any difference in Fred Susong is bound to be an improvement. I got to get on a thicker shirt and some dry socks. Reckon you can get the harness on Dixie and back her into the shafts?"

"I thought you was going to bed?"

"Well, confoundation, a man can't let a young one die, can he? Just because all the Susongs are whittled off narrow and sharp to start with ain't no reason to kill 'em off young."

"Why don't you go in Fred's car, then?"

"Uh-huh! And get mired up in the first ford and have to wade out. Ond Dixie'll go where I tell her, and they ain't no danger of her getting water in her carburetor. You better put a mess of oats in a bag and put it under the buggy seat. I may have to stay all night if the river's bad, and I don't want to depend on no Susongs to feed my horse."

"Well, land knows the Susongs have got ten times as much as we've got, Enos Rumly. Looks like it's little enough to do to feed horse."

"That's why they've got it—because they ain't wasted any of it feeding other people's horses!" Rumly ripped out his shoestrings wearily. It was ten miles across Thunderbolt, the wild, tumultuous river, to the Susongs farm.

But over on the far side, in the big old brick house of the Susongs, which had been one of the first built in the state and was so ancient that the beams were put together with wooden pins, was Luella Susong tending a sick baby. Rumly looked at his profile in the gloom, blunt, reserved, a stubborn outline under the edge of his felt hat. "Ain't no meanness there," thought the old man. "Just wrongness—that's all."

"Reckon you think a sight of your boy, Fred?" he inquired.

of the motherless little Luella, offering advice and home-brewed camintea to the two bewildered and ineffectual aunts. And Luella, growing up slim and sweet, with heavy-shaded eyes which were colored even in girlhood with the softly tired, maternal patience which denotes the God-made mother, had confided all her secrets to Rumly, pulling down his long, freckled ears to whisper into them all her secrets except the one that she was going to marry Fred Susong. And in his wisdom, Enos Rumly knew why she had not told him that.

The Susongs were not a popular family in the country.

/They were the richest family, and the richest family is often the least popular, particularly when its wealth is not the result of progressive achievement, but of tight-fisted hoarding and sharp-eyed, turning of bargains. The Susongs were stock buyers and traders; the Susong barns were well roofed because dampness ruins hay, which costs money; the Susong horses were always insolent sleek; the Susong men were well-fed and full-blooded, riding to town on horseback every day—to save wear and tear on steel tires.

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RUMLY had stayed away from the church when Luella Ives married Fred Susong. He had stayed away from the neighborhood above Thunderbolt—which was not hard to do since the Susongs preferred the Parrottsville physicians, who traded out a quarter of beef every year. He knew the sort of life Luella must have, mured in that old brick house, which Fred's grandfather had left to him. He knew the glad gentleness, the bright faith in humanity which belonged to Luella—and even though he had sawed bones and lanced felonies for thirty odd years, Rumly did not like her. She was learned to milk till I learned her. It ain't the milk. He's just puny and ain't got any constitution to start with."

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THE rain ceased to blow, and above the sharp yell of the wind which they could hear now, the slow, hollow voice of the river. Thunderbolt, always more or less untamable, was having a royal temper tantrum.

"From the racket she's out of the bags," said Rumly. "Reckon old Milo'll get us across? Sound like she was running pretty swift. Had a good highway and a bridge here now, and our could drive your car over any weather."

"Had a bridge here I wouldn't have any car." I'd have to sell it to pay my taxes. "Hey, Milo!" He raised his voice in the loud stock-driver's yowl, as penetrating as the call of a wolf. Old Roxie squared herself at the edge of the stream. It swelled up to her fore-calls, reaching a little higher at each eddy, till the old mare began to balk and sidle. Fred lifted his voice again, and from the other side of the river a hot spark of light winked. A yell answered, blurred by the wind and unintelligible.

"Milo's coming," Fred declared.

"I don't hear the cable."

"He's coming—the light's moving."

But the light moved—not toward the river, but away from it. Manifestly Milo.

"Washes out her rent, don't she?" I sent Sim Thames by to tell Luella last week that Minnie's kids were sick—not to have her in the house. Didn't she tell you?"

"Milo ain't coming," announced Rumly calmly. "I figured the current was too swift. We'll have to cross on the railroad bridge and walk to your place. You wait here till I stand Dixie in Nahum Brent's shed."

The railroad bridge was a fearsome mode of passage, even by daylight. It leaped, spider and frail, at tremendous height, over the reeling, rock-strangled bed of the river. There was no lengthwise plank, and the reach between the wooden cross-ties was so short that it lacked being a single stride and was too long for a man to compass two, so it was crossed in a sort of monotonous trot, with the water writhing dizzily below and only precarious eight-inch width at the end of the rail, in case you dislodged throughfare with a freight train.

Rumly set his great feet doggedly on every tie, swinging his old bag rhythmically, his derby hat clinging to his head by a miracle, his coat-tails flapping about his legs. Behind him Fred Susong was having a poor part, his great hands holding the reins, hanging down between them. Fred Susong sat silent upon the seat. Rumly regarded him sidelong.

"Uh-huh. Listen here, Ella Joe. You telephone up to Park's, up to Parrottsville—get his house, because the store'll be shut—tell him to send down a dozen shots of diphtheria antitoxin first thing in the morning. Hear? Tell him to send 'em on the first train, and then you go down to the post office if I ain't back and get 'em."

Old Dixie, slanting her wise old head to the rain, found the driest part of the road and struck into a tireless, long-legged gait that sent the black-wet trees and the low, rain-beaten houses streaking rapidly to the rear. Rumly sat, sagged forward, his knees apart, his great hands holding the reins, hanging down between them. Fred Susong sat silent upon the seat. Rumly regarded him sidelong.

"The wind lashed at the buggy top as they turned to the right into the road to Thunderbolt. Dixie flapped her tail irritably, but kept to the middle of the road. To the right they could hear the hollow shout of Turkey Creek as it tumbled off the rocks behind Furman's sawmill.

"Old Turkey's tearing," remarked Rumly as the wheels grated down on the gravel of the ford. "Git in, Dixie—wet your feet. Better pick up your feet, Fred; might wash over the sillus."

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DOXIE stepped in undismayed by the dark wreath of the creek. The buggy sagged into a washed hole, tilted back for an instant, and then righted. Doggedly the old horse fought for footing, jerking the wheels over the slippery stones.

"Maybe somd day this county'll wake up and vote the bridge bonds," Rumly said as they lurched up the muddy ascent on the other side.

"Bridges cost money," returned Fred Susong. "Cheapest kind of a bridge costs ten or fifteen thousand dollars. Take a sight of taxes to pay for even one—and taxes are too high now."

"Reckon so," mused Rumly. "Reckon you voted against the bonds?"

"I'll keep on votin' against 'em. A man's better off now, in this country, if he don't own a thing. The landowner gets gouged every way he turns. It's roads and schools for a lot of skinnies that never did a thing for the county and never will."

"Guess that's so. Sending the skinries to school may help some, of course. Getting good roads so progressive people'll move in might help, too."

"We've got too many progressive people now," argued Fred. "All these loud shouters that have got ways figured out to spend other people's money—like that fellow that bought the paper down at Parrottsville. He's a sample—always yelping about the stockyards smelling bad; get so a man can't drive a herd of stock down to load 'em after a while."

"Uh-huh. Reckon that's so. Get up, Dox; we've got four miles to go yet."

Fred Susong fell silent. He was patently uneasy, sitting forward on the seat as though he impelled old Dixie's thudding feet to move faster by his tense poll. Rumly, looking at his profile in the gloom, blunt, reserved, a stubborn outline under the edge of his felt hat. "Ain't no meanness there," thought the old man. "Just wrongness—that's all."

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RUMLY let a little picture dance for a minute before his eyes—a picture of Luella under a great rose-shaded light.

Brent to give my hoss a mess of fodder in the morning. If the ice gets on the railroad bridge I'll have to board with you a spell."

Fred looked up quickly. Luella had gone into the kitchen.

"Is he bad, do you think, Doc?" Rumly rubbed his long, bony chin. He looked at Fred keenly.

"This is one time," he said. "When I wish there was a bridge across Thunderbolt."

Dawn came cold. There was no comfort in the drab light that trickled through the sleepy windows, slowly drenching in its cold flood the warmer familiar presence of the campfire and the fire. In the grim grayness the sick child lay asleep, his eyes already shadowed and sunken, his chin a bit tremulous.

"I'd rather have any disease or death than diphtheria," Rumly said.

"No chance to cross that railroad bridge with all this ice on it," he remarked.

Rumly pursed his long lips. "I wish he was better—but he ain't. If I had two shots of antitoxin he'd improve in a little while. Maybe I better go to town—I can get across that bridge, I reckon. High places don't make me dizzy like they do you. Fred Nahum Brent has got a mule that's shod I could get to town."

But Luella sank on the foot of the bed.

"Oh, I tried." Fred cried. "I tried till it made me sick!" They saw his hands then, pared to the quick in spots bleeding.

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